



The Great Recession

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Argotist Ebooks

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Inelegant

Her mind, she tells herself, is a Center City mind. It's connected (somehow) to the whole world. She still goes into Joan Shepp on Walnut, even if she can't buy anything. The fabrics, the cuts of the dresses—this is who she is. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knows she's been cut like a piece of fabric; & the hands that cut her have made her inelegant. To handle Joan Shepp silk with dishrag hands, is to have waded into the deep sogginess of the 'burbs, & emerged like jell-o.

Abington Night

I keep imagining Abington at night.
The sense in the air is this: we can't
be as far down as we are. The guy
tending bar here (in this dreamed-
of place) is an old friend. His angle
on the world (he's been married and
divorced) is satire. But satire depends
on people being willing to laugh. And
if I still sit in my car in the parking
lot of Abington High leering
at girls, I can still laugh at that too.
The Dairy Queen on Limekiln Pike
remains the same. The girls still like
ice-cream in the summer-time, right?

Fellating the Pickle

Everyone knows she has about two years to live. The blonde babe who runs shipments sits smoking at the Esquire Bar with a guy who still has the rat-tails he had at Cheltenham. How do you behave when you have two years to live? Well, you might try making your body a weapon. You might bop around shaking your hips so that no one might touch. Or fellating the pickle which comes with your sandwich. You might. But as you dance on nothingness, someone watching you is also watching his watch.

Greeks

"They pulled a gun on him at the diner down the street. He was halfway through his burger. The Greeks who own the place didn't care. They got bought off a long time ago. I eat there for free sometimes. He probably eats there for free too. They don't play sides, that family. So if you want a place that's your place (as we used to have), you better have more money than the other guys, which we don't anymore. And it'll take you a year to nail this guy too."

Sports-talk

This guy sticks to sports because the team makes a sport of kicking his ass, he said.
It's not like I didn't believe— but he only sticks to sports (I thought) in the end because the rules are right there in his head. And the guy who lives out of his car and has the radio set to "Sports-talk" all the time deserves to be shot. So: there was more than one game we were watching that night. This guy came in twice. But if he won't play by league rules, he's out.

Church Road Pt.1

Her big thing these days is cars. She loves to watch the bling ones (Mercedes, BMWs) as she sits in the passenger seat. It always happens, at least once a day on Church Road, that she sees one she wants so much she has to pinch herself to stop the ache. In any case, her Mom tries to be forbearing, but they always wind up fighting. Money is just too tight, and it's running out. But she's good at getting encouraging comments on Facebook. And if she occasionally gets one from someone with the right car, her night is made. Yes, if he asks, he may pick her up at eight.

Church Road Pt. 2 (Krispy Kremes)

This man runs a high-level corporation,
sidles down the street in a leisure suit,
I greet him and he greets me, does that
make me superior? Am I jealous? I ask
you this because I'm questioning things
I've never questioned before. You go
through life, go through certain motions
(never question things), then one day
find yourself belly-up, and wonder what
your life amounts to. I still drive
the Mercedes, & as I glide down Church
Road the response is a platitude. I stop
for gas in Northeast Philly, Krispy Kremes— hip, right?

Walls and Ears

A period like this, he writes on his blog, can make one question one's relationship with language. There's only one word for "bankrupt." "Insolvency," he supposes, works, but it's not drastic enough. What is drastic enough is this—popcorn dinners in this squat in Northern Delaware, nobody watching, "I can't think therefore I am not," and a sinking sensation of how the Academy's ego shuts out all light. He was a professor, he says, to no one in particular, with a teaching edge.

Fetching

Scabs, sores, pus—that's all she can think about, as she walks around in circles. But (of course) that's just my perspective. I gave her what I could (what she needs is money). So, two bodies are cramped in a crowded movie theater, watching a foreign film about the lives of terrorists. They're both tuned out, but have been told the film is excellent by several reliable sources, who consider them unimpeachable dogs—loyal, anxious, fetching.

Freezers

He walks around in a bilious, towering rage—he can't even stand the teenager selling him cigarettes. Nor can he stand the stacks of newspapers, the freezers full of soda, the rows of gum and mints. Everything here was made in a factory, as was he, only to find in the last epoch of his life he was alone, the shelf he was on bare but for him. The teenager behind the counter laughs at this old grump, because his father is even worse, who can't afford smokes.

Rolling and Falling

He keeps up the pretense— we're rolling here.
Any press would have to be good press, just
because it's us. It's funny how, on rainy nights,
he feels a sense of degradation about the life
he leads; that there's nowhere to fall, but he
keeps jumping. He has dreams where he falls
forever. You can roll and fall at the same time,
a voice tells him. He hears voices which tell
him many things. Especially in the middle of
the night, when scum glistens on the walls of the squat.

Peanut Butter and Rabies

The white-haired woman with glasses, doing charity work, wants some charity herself. The nights at this place have been long—the kids get disgruntled, people aren't bringing in as much food as they used to. If it's another peanut butter and jelly night, she has to bear the brunt. All the kids see is a half-empty plate. Her husband won't come anymore—the atmosphere is too strained. The kids, she thinks in spite of herself, are like a bunch of dogs with rabies. And, as she can't see, they think the same of her.

Shit-Face

Or maybe you'd like to condescend
to inform us of your whereabouts
the night she got mugged? Where
were you? If you could only see how
raising a child alone out here can
break you down, corrupt you, leave
you with nothing, you wouldn't have
taken the money and disappeared.
We have enough money left for a
year and then we hit the road in the
old car, looking for you. She'll be
done school by then and if she can
find a job when we settle, hallelujah.
If not, lawyer up, shit-face. You're ours.

Wine and Spirits Shop

I look out through the glass façade—
a parking lot, cars, the whole suburban
patina. It gives me the flu in my old
age: these people, almost all of them,
have more money than me. And less
to show for it (I see) inside. I've seen
them live and die for twenty years here.
It never gets any easier. But look at me:
I work at a wine and spirits shop on this
strip-mall, so I can keep my thoughts
in any order I want, no one's going to notice.
I notice. I count to me. I count myself.
I can count. That's a twenty and a one, sir.

Sports-Bar Crowd

Let's stay on the surface, please.
Let's make our lives as compact
and lemon-shaped as a football. As I
sit among the sports-bar crowd, I
feel compact and lemon-shaped. I
am, in fact, being squeezed into someone's
beer. The whole pulpy story he's telling—
the hook-up never happened. I know
it for a fact. I've got (as ever) the goods
myself, I just doesn't use them. That's the
big treat for me— not using them. Busting
hooks-up. Getting drunk and not fucking.

Chinese Water Torture

Chinese water torture: that's how it
is today with these girls, these schools,
the IRS, everyone. He thinks this on
his bike, as he swerves through the
city streets. Last year he got hit: broke
his shoulder. He was still insured then.
Now, he's forced to just risk it. Two
of the other messengers he "grew up"
with are now deceased. He scattered
one of their ashes into the Delaware
on Christmas night. Then, he had his turkey. Cold.

Under the Knife

A razor was placed on a table outside—someone handed it in. From that moment forward, everyone at this Starbucks (the staff) were considered “under the knife.” They were all young enough to be my kids, and they all got hit before we could make any arrests. I still get my coffee there every day—the replacements are (as usual) the same kids all over again. The point (for me) is that this is a far uglier world than most people believe it to be. The older you get, the harder it is to take.

The Last Decoy

“After the last decoy, there is no other.”
This is what he wants inscribed on his
head-stone; then he remembers; with the
life he’s led, there won’t be a head-stone.
He stands like an ass outside the Kimmel
Center, avoiding the rain beneath
The concrete awning, made up to look twenty
years younger than he is. It’s a random
assignment, handed down from a random
place—but one (he assumes) above him.
Broad Street glitters in slickness as the day
wanes and streetlights switch on. He’ll be
out here a long time in the rain.

Anchor Man

Every day it's the same routine—
a few of these, a few puffs on this
or that. He reads from the prompter,
high as a kite. Everything he reads is,
as he knows, pure nonsense and even
high, he can't get comfortable with the
situation. It's all too obvious—not
that anyone's out there to notice. The
perks of local fame aren't much anymore.
But they drop the pills and the pot into
his lap to arrange the emptiness and
deadness of things. He seems to see,
receding into a greasy gray sunset,
some notion of an ideal he once had,
at least sometimes. The smile freezes on.

American X

From inside the American art scene, he used to think to himself (especially New York), you can only take things so far if you're not backed up; and (praise the Lord) he was. But he only did the requisite amount of dealing, and no more. He actually cared, here and there, about what he was creating. He was mordant and morbid the post-modern way, the art-press said. But the "X" someone scrawled on a napkin and left on his night-stand last night suggest something mordant to his will. Isn't that funny?

Romance

She was standing, in the dream, at
the end of a landing strip which emptied
into an open field of grass in pitch-black
night; her baby-doll dress was pitch-black
too; and, as I approached her, I saw her
dyed-black hair was cut into a fringe over
her forehead. I told her who she was for
me and she told me the same; and some light,
maybe the moon, shone down on us.
Was there life left to bring into the world?
Was that our light against the pitch blackness?
For better or worse, it would have to be.
Our arms were entwined.

Philadelphia Macabre

I saw it on the news— one of the ashen-looking tenements at 22nd and Market collapsed last night. It even made national headlines. As far as I'm concerned, everyone I've ever loved was in that tenement, every dream I ever dreamt was squashed in the falling concrete, any future I might've had was dust before the entire edifice had fallen— now it's a hole in the ground, a hole in the street, a hole in our heads. Now I'm squashed myself into a suburb, choked by claustrophobia, remembering walking that block late at night, stoned, everything concealed as a cut I couldn't notice.

Mouth Breathers

They keep you running in circles, these hacks, and what they want to express (as artists) is the nothingness of everything—particularly, who we think we are. When they see your games, what they Zen master is your sense that you exist. But they don't do it with any intelligence; they can't do detail, complexity, nuance. As I'm chained to decoying against these mouth-breathers, I feel that gnawing sense of nothingness and don't know what to do with it, except to say something. My own mouth-breathing superiors can't bust me for doing so. Or, that's what I dare to hope.

Do It With Teeth

The Internet guy from the United States
is one she likes. Her and her friends sit in
Hyde Park diddling with their smart-phones,
and she always picks him to linger on. He
has a blog about international politics,
& one about culture. He's a Harvard guy, too.
The twist in the tale, for her, is that he's
actually decent to look at. She plucks
the banjo to his Google image search. But she's
a right ugly slag, and who she's got isn't
much. If he discovered what she was up to,
he'd beat her senseless, then hop a plane to
Boston to top him. Her secret is, she likes Americans
better. At least when they lie, they do it with teeth.

Ideals

The guys in the Harvard administration buildings have had enough. Where's the old good guy system, folks? Despite our Ivy League pedigree, the system used to be simple: you scratch my back, etc. Not all of us have touch-the-ceiling IQs. We represent Harvard where it counts—where the money is. You want genius beyond that, screw you, buddy. The problem is that tax-guys, parents, everyone's starting to ask more questions. Even the guys who get cuts want more information. What we're under orders not to reveal never changes much. Now they want us to live up to our "ideals." Ideals?

Space

On his daily walk down Fayette Street, he senses something he's never sensed before—space. With everyone cleared out (into death, probably), he owns the ground he treads on, and the space he takes up is his own. That's his compensation, as an older man, for the misery and deprivations of the Great Recession—space. He feels the cosmos, how vast it is, and as he stands in a short line at CVS to pick up his prescriptions, the cosmos has in it something eternal, which will continue with or without him, or us. Emptiness is what you make it.

She Drives a Ford

She sees no reason not to flaunt what she's got. The way her mind plays around with the idea of dying is that it doesn't. She just assumes that if she is going to die this summer, obsessing about it won't help. She's more obsessed with the new pills they've been throwing at her. As for her dude, forget it. He doesn't have much left. When she pulls into the Whitemarsh Shopping Center, the sunlight still feels fresh on her face. She can still afford a macchiato. It's true, everyone notices: she still looks good. And the full tank in her Ford is her ass backed.

A Dog's Life

They're letting him write something which he knows can't be published. They're also watching him (literally) as he writes. When the family you come from is not a family but a FAMILY, he writes, and then loses heart. The quarantine's gone on for three weeks. They feed him pot and pills, but no girls. They've mastered his eyes, which he thought might be tricky for them. His eyes (he sees) are a dog's eyes, which yearn to be put down, and to sleep. He's never got used to thinking differently, but if he can't write he might as well be dead. He writes, and waits for someone to shoot him.

Lightning Storm

He has his car parked where they can't see him. Though the angle is strange, he can see the two kids, about thirteen, a boy and a girl, in the dug-out holding hands. He's here for a reason other than them. But something about the vista of the two kids in the dug-out brings tears to his eyes. I'm human, he thinks to himself, I'm a human being. Do I belong to the human race? It's begun to thunder and lightning—the three of them are all trapped (he thinks) differently. For once, he likes something past himself.

Mini-Mart

What happens in the Mini-Mart stays in the Mini-Mart. When they get the call from the guys at Weis, one shift takes over for another, & everything which needs to move moves. They have once-a-week regular customers who want in on the action. This summer its really starting to swing. The problem is that the cops have figured out the whole game. Off-duty cops fill up their tanks here just to watch these amateurs. The D.A. guys are watching the cops watch; and, for the moment, everyone's happy. The head manager used to be a professional, knows the whole game too, but he's just here for the paycheck.

Ridge Pike

To someone stationed in the parking lot of the Whitemarsh Shopping Center, it's shocking how light the traffic is on Ridge Pike on a Saturday morning. He's got his coffee and the radio's on. It's crisp and sharp—soon to be a hot day. But he was depending on seeing three of what he'll now only see one of. His mind wanders—this place didn't look that different twenty years ago. His routines haven't changed. If things go faster now, it's just because he's older. And there's not a cloud in the sky.

Morning Train

Pacing outside the Conshohocken Station
on a summer morning, having spent \$10.50
on a round-trip ticket to Market East as she's
been forced to do twice a week, she gets
nervous about having to shit or piss on the
train (she's got coffee), and if she shits her
panties they will very much notice, but nothing
can be done—a gig is a gig. The photo shoots
make her wonder who's left to jerk off to her
feisty little parts, what fourteen-year-old
intercepts the catalogues in the mail to lock
himself in the bathroom. Turns out, she
boards the train and does have to shit.
Welcome to half an hour in Hades. Thanks, Mom.

Yellow Cab Company

His own language has no words for some of these things Americans talk about. He doesn't bother to talk to his passengers anymore. Nor does he e-mail his family back home. He only thinks how to up the ante at playing the video games he likes. The games allow him to express how he feels— here's who he shoots, here's who he spares. He connects to others with the game, too. His supervisor thinks of him as mid-level; not one of the best or worst. He eats modestly and sensibly. One day, he might be able to afford bigger speakers, and a real bed, if he scrounges.

Crumpet with Teeth

Someone actually bothered to ask him this:
why does the media like fake people better?
The answer, as he knows, is simple: because
they're easier to control. In truth, he said
nothing in reply, just left. He was trying to
pick her up: crumpet, they call it in England.
Since when is there crumpet with teeth? He
browses the mags where he is: the piss-on-mes,
the shit-on-mes. He does feel shit on. Conquest
has never been easy for him (though he's
often been called "striking"), and now his
position is a disreputable one. He'll take
the black-with-big-tits one, please.

Acknowledgments

As/Is— “Space”

The Four Quarters— “Church Road Pt. 1,” “Rolling and Falling,” “Shit-Face,” “Wine and Spirits Shop”

On Barcelona— “Chinese Water Torture,” “Fetching,” “Fellating the Pickle,” “Peanut Butter and Rabies”

Otoliths— “American X,” “Anchor Man,” “Wet Dream,” “Limekiln Pike,” “Abington Night”

Red Room— “The Last Decoy”

About the Author